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THE OWENS VALLEY EARTHQUAKE OF 1872.

BY C. MULHOLLAND.

[Read May 7, 1894.]

The most violent earthquake known in the history of California had its center of action a few miles from Owens Lake, Inyo County.

This terrible convulsion occurred on Tuesday, March 26, 1872. The night was calm, the sky clear, the moon just past full. The Sierra Nevada Mountains were covered with snow, which shone like robes of pearly satin in the moonlight. The valley presented as peaceful and secure a scene as eyes ever looked upon, and the great mountains on either side appeared the very embodiment of solidity and stability.

In an instant, without any warning symptoms from the heavens above or the earth beneath, the mountains were swaying like storm-tossed trees and the valley rolled like the sea.

About 25 minutes past 2 o'clock in the morning great rumbling and roaring were heard to come from deep in the earth. At the same instant the ground rolled violently; there was also a twisting motion, and this, together with the heaving and rolling, produced great and instant destruction. Buildings of stone or adobe were reduced to heaps of ruins in a moment, and even strong frame buildings were wrecked or thrown from their foundations.

Had this awful convulsion occurred at a large city, there is no doubt it would have been attended with such a loss of life and property as was caused by the most noted earthquakes in ancient or modern times.

Fortunately the country affected was sparsely settled, and there were no large buildings inhabited by considerable numbers of people. But in proportion to population in the region affected, the loss of life was very great.

The town of Lone Pine is situated five miles north from Owens Lake; Mount Whitney, the highest peak of the Sierra Nevada, is directly west from the town; the summit of the mountain is twelve miles distant in an air line, but to reach it takes a journey of three days.

The greatest loss of life was at Lone Pine. About three-fourths of the buildings were of stone and adobe, and every one of these was dashed into a heap of ruins at the first crash of the earthquake. More

than sixty persons were instantly killed or wounded. A large store, crowded with goods, fell and buried Rockwell Loomis, one of the owners, who was sleeping in the building. Fire broke out in the ruin near where Mr. Loomis was lying wounded and held fast in the wreck. A large quantity of powder in kegs was close by, and it looked certain that at any moment the horrors of an explosion would be added to the calamity. A man named William Covington was also in the building and escaped without hurt. He quickly learned that Loomis was alive and saw his danger from the powder. The quakings and roar of the earthquake yet continued; the screams of terror-stricken women and the shouts of men were heard on every side.

In the midst of all the confusion and terror Covington made his way to his friend, managed to extinguish the fire and got the powder kegs covered securely from sparks. He then got Loomis free from the ruin and conveyed him to a place of safety. Men have gained lasting fame for deeds done in battle that were not more truly heroic than this act of Covington.

In another house Mrs. C. M. Joslyn and her little son were asleep in bed when the crash came. On the other side of a partition her two little daughters were sleeping. A falling wall instantly killed the child in the mother's arms, and she was severely injured; the two girls were not hurt. A large and strongly built brewery was partially crushed in. Several people were asleep in the building and all escaped without injury, except an infant, the child of one of the proprietors, which was killed instantly. In another house a mother, two daughters and a son were all instantly killed. But it would be tedious to extend the list of killed.

There were a number of remarkable escapes, only a few of which need be mentioned. Colonel Whipple occupied a two-story residence. On the night of the earthquake his family were absent, and he slept on the second floor. When the crash came the house went down, and he was buried in the ruin. He exclaimed: "This is death," and thought of his absent family. He quickly found himself able to move, and, though nearly suffocated, managed to get out of the ruin. He escaped with but a few slight scratches. A man named Austin was also sleeping in the house, in another room. This man had one arm and three ribs broken.

Dr. Gelcich occupied a building, one end being used as a drug store and the other as a dwelling. The end of the dwelling went out at the first crash, and through this he escaped with his wife and infant child, just as the side walls and roof fell in. From across the street the doctor heard the cries of Mrs. Joslyn, calling for help where she was buried with her children in the ruins of her house. He started to give assistance, but before he could do anything another shock threw him

down and he was hurt so severely as afterwards caused him to spit blood. In another building two men were sleeping together; one escaped unhurt; the other was nearly killed.

All who escaped and were able to do anything went to work at once to rescue those who were yet in the ruins, and to care for the injured who were already released.

The bodies were also taken from the ruins and prepared for burial; sixteen were persons of foreign birth, having no relatives near the place; coffins were prepared for these, each having the name inscribed thereon. There were fifteen of these coffins; one of these contained two bodies, a mother and child. All these were buried in one great grave; this grave is about one-half mile north from Lone Pine, and is still kept enclosed within a neat picket fence. The bodies of those who had relatives or friends were taken charge of by these and buried.

The whole number killed at Lone Pine, as far as can now be ascertained, was twenty-six.

About ten miles north from Lone Pine, and on the east side of Owens River, is the Eclipse mine and quartz mill. Henry Tregallas, the manager, lived with his wife in an adobe house near the mill. At the first shake the house went down in ruins. All the other buildings save the mill, which is a very strong frame structure, went down at the first crash. The terrified people who escaped from the buildings quickly got together, and it was found that none were missing but Mr. Tregallas and his wife. Among all the others few were hurt, none seriously, and none killed.

The men quickly went in search of the missing people; when found in the ruins Mr. Tregallas was dead, his arms about his wife, who was badly hurt and nearly unconscious. The woman was cared for as well as possible, and fully recovered in course of time. The body of her husband was taken charge of and buried by the members of the Masonic lodge at Independence.

At the town of Independence, which is the county seat, and sixteen miles north from Lone Pine, the wreck of buildings was general. But more timber had been used here than at Lone Pine, and partitions and joists protected the people in the buildings from falling walls; as a consequence no lives were lost, nor was any person very seriously hurt.

The Court House was a two-story brick building. The County Clerk and Under Sheriff were sleeping on the ground floor. At the first shock the whole of the upper story went crashing to the south and fell beyond the lower part of the building. The walls of the lower story were left standing, but badly cracked to the ground. The two officers escaped from the ruins with but slight injury.

P. A. Chalfant, who was then editor of the *Inyo Independent*, gives the following account of his experience:

He was awakened from sound sleep, and it was some time before he became conscious of the cries of his terrified wife and of the awful convulsions of the earth. With a feeling of indescribable terror he reached the floor. Reeling and staggering like a drunken man for a time—measured by the sensations it seemed an age—he vainly sought to grasp from its crib a sleeping child. It was impossible, for as he staggered forward the crib rolled away, and then returned with a shock that sent him reeling against the bed. By some means he finally got the child in his arms and started out of the room.

At this moment a crash was heard in the printing office directly overhead, where stood two printing presses, weighing over two thousand pounds, which seemed to be breaking through the floor. Unlocking the outer door he threw the child to the heaving ground, and returned to meet his wife as she staggered out with a babe in her arms. Amid the falling plastering and crashing pottery all escaped without a scratch. The whole time thus occupied did not probably exceed fifty seconds. Similar experiences were had in every house in town.

A well-known attorney, who is now in practice at Independence, and is a man of quick apprehension, appeared to understand the situation instantly. When the first shock occurred and the walls of his house were tumbling down, he leaped from bed and shouted to his wife: "Get up, Betty, get up; hell's broke loose." The couple escaped without a scratch; but the impression then made upon the mind of that attorney was such that there is reasonable ground to hope that he may in the end escape the bourne so many of his profession appear to be destined for.

The wreck and destruction of property was general at Independence; but no lives were lost, and, as already stated, no one was seriously hurt.

Two miles north from Independence is a fine settlement called Camp Independence. At the time of the earthquake all the buildings were of adobe, and all were partially destroyed. Only one life was lost. A farmer named Jacob Vogt, his wife and one child lived in an adobe house. At the first crash the building went down in ruin, and before Mr. Vogt could extricate his wife and child the latter was suffocated. Mrs. Vogt and a few others were injured, but none seriously.

At Fish Spring, twenty-one miles north of Independence, buildings were wrecked and the inmates buried in the ruins. But, strange to say, no one was killed and only one person, an aged woman, was seriously hurt. This woman was the mother of Henry C. Paine, well-known in Los Angeles. She recovered from her injuries and lived until two or

three years ago, when she died at the home of a married daughter and at the place where she had been hurt by the earthquake.

At the town of Bishop, forty-seven miles north from Independence, the shake was also severe, and stone and adobe buildings went down in ruins. Along with other members of their family, two young ladies, daughters of J. P. Zaney, were that night at a ball in the town. A heavy stone chimney at their home fell, crashing through the roof and down upon the bed where these girls would have been lying had they not been at the dance. If in bed at that moment, both would certainly have been killed. This incident is not found in Sunday School story books. It may afford a good argument to girls who want to go to a dance when the old folks object.

The earthquake extended along the Sierra Nevada Mountains far to the north, and at Aurora, and other places, one hundred miles or more from Owens Valley, buildings were badly injured or totally wrecked, but no loss of life, or even serious injury to persons, was reported from that direction.

The center of the convulsion was at or near Lone Pine, and radiating from that in all directions, the earth movement diminished.

At Little Lake, fifty miles south of Lone Pine, the first shock was severe. On that night a stage and eleven large teams were at the station. The stage driver, named H. W. Robinson, was sleeping in a room there. At the first shock his impression was that his team was running away with the stage, and he jumped up, grabbed for the lines and shouted: "Whoa! Whoa!" He was tumbled out of bed to the floor, became fully conscious and jumped out of the room, escaping unhurt. The men with the big teams were sleeping in their wagons, to which the mules were tied. When the wagons began to roll and pitch, one of the drivers jumped up, put on the brakes, and began to address the mules in the vigorous way usual with mule drivers, thinking the animals were causing all the trouble. Another driver shouted to him: "You d—d fool; 't aint the mules; it's an earthquake." No one was hurt at Little Lake, nor was any damage reported from south of that place.

That the center of this great disturbance of the earth was deep-seated is evident from the permanent changes on the surface.

About twenty-eight miles north from Lone Pine the bed of Owens River sank, making a depression that took the river several hours to fill up. This depression still remains, a lake of some hundreds of acres in extent.

About seven miles north of Lone Pine the ground sank toward the west; the river followed this depression and made a new channel, in which it continues to flow. The high banks of the old channel can yet

be seen about two miles to the east from the present west bank of the river, at a point four miles north of Lone Pine.

A half mile north from Lone Pine a row of tall trees extends westward at a right angle to the wagon road. About 100 yards from the road there is an offset in this row of trees. Beyond that point where the straight line is broken, the trees stand about 16 feet farther north than those in the line from the same point back to the road. This offset was made by the earthquake. None of the trees on either side of the line where the break was made were disturbed; all now stand erect and uninjured, just as they were before the earthquake.

High up in the mountains enormous masses of rock were shaken loose and hurled down into the canyons. I have seen pine trees, that must be 100 feet or more in height, still standing erect, but only their tops visible. The whole canyon where they stand is filled up with rocks, the debris from high peaks that fell during the earthquake. It is now over 22 years since that awful convulsion, and during that time no part of the state has been less affected by earthquakes than Inyo County.